

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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WHAT DOES THE LORD WANT?

Micah 6:1-8

Many of you have seen the movie *Fireproof*. It's a compelling story. It's a bit of a tear jerker – about a fireman named Caleb Holt. He lives by the old firefighter's motto: “Never leave your partner behind.” But, as the story unfolds, we see that he doesn't really live by the rule at home.

Caleb and his wife Catherine constantly argue – over finances, about sharing work around the house, and especially about their outside interests, some of which fall far short of godliness. They've grown tired and weary of each other. Caleb feels like he gets no respect and Catherine wonders when she stopped being “good enough” for her husband. They are on the verge of breaking up.

Without giving away too much of the movie, Caleb's father challenges his son to commit to a 40-day experiment called The Love Dare designed to bring biblical principles to save his marriage. Wondering if it's worth the effort, Caleb agrees. In the course of this experiment, he makes a life-changing commitment to Christ, and with God's help, begins to understand what it means to truly love his wife.

The movie forces us to ask how a husband and wife, once madly in love, grew tired of each other. As you've heard, next Saturday we're offering a men's seminar based on the movie. I encourage every man here to come. Our teachers will offer helpful ways to “fireproof our lives and marriages.”

You see, when one or both partners in a marriage have unmet expectations or do not understand their biblical calling in the relationship, the inevitable result almost always is hurt feelings, emotional distance, and eventually . . . divorce. In that kind of conflict, when a husband and wife grow tired of each other – like Caleb and Catherine did – something has to be done.

Here in Micah 6, God has the same kind of quarrel with Israel. Not that the Lord has grown distant towards them, but rather that His people have grown weary of their relationship with God. So He does something.

This is the scene in Micah. The Lord summons His people to court, really one step away from divorce court. In the Old Testament prophets, we call this a covenant lawsuit – God's calling back His people when they have sinned and grown weary of their relationship with Him. It's sort of like the counselor's office – a last ditch effort to restore the relationship. What we have in Micah 6 is a courtroom drama.

Micah gave this prophecy during the last days of the divided kingdom – Israel was on the north and Judah was to the south. One of the kings who reigned during this time was Ahaz, one of the most wicked of the kings of Judah, a man who worshipped idols instead of the living God – even throwing his own child into a fire as a sacrifice.

It was during Micah's tenure that the kingdom of Israel came to a bitter end when the cruel armies of Assyria – the Nazis of the ancient world – destroyed the country.

God's people had exhausted their patience. Life was hard. They wondered why God had allowed such troubles and abandoned His worship. They responded to their problems with a lifestyle of dishonesty, deceit, and violence.

COURTROOM DRAMA

Look at how this passage opens: *Listen to what the LORD says: "Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say. Hear, O mountains, the LORD's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against His people; He is lodging a charge against Israel.*

God speaks in really strong terms. He has been wronged and He summons Micah to stand before the people of Israel on His behalf. It's a public affair for all to see. Maybe Micah gave this message in the temple courts where many of Jerusalem's leaders heard. Or maybe during a great feast, like the Passover, when the whole nation was assembled. We don't know – except that God called the whole nation to account.

Israel had abandoned their God and acted like the people around them. Their sins were great. Look down the page at verses 9-12. We read of ill-gotten treasures and dishonest scales, unjust and violent men who abuse others; a nation full of leaders who are liars, full of people of deceit. Israel has not kept their marriage vows as God's covenant people.

They had grown tired of following God and it showed!

We read that the earth itself bears testimony of the long record of Israel's sin. Why does Micah speak of mountains and foundations? Highest peaks and lowest points (the foundations) show that all of creation stands as witness to Israel's disobedience. All that God has made – seen and unseen – is a witness to their failure to walk with God. That's how serious it is.

And that makes sense. These were the very witnesses summoned to observe God's making of His covenant with Israel. Three times during His covenant-making with Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, God said, "I call heaven and earth to witness." All of creation knew that in entering God's covenant, Israel as God's people enjoyed the blessing of God and had promised obedience to His commands.

All creation witnessed Israel's infidelity and God's faithfulness to these marriage vows. The promises were sure. Only when the mountains are moved and their foundations destroyed would God's commitment to His people suffer a lack of testimony before the world.

So with this remarkable assembly gathered as witnesses, Micah reveals the purpose of his message. God has a complaint against Israel. A charge against them, not to hand out punishment, but to restore the relationship. God is personal and passionate, like a husband pleading with his wife. We see the urgent plea of a loving God whose heart has been broken.

God's people have lost their interest in their relationship with Him. In the midst of their troubles, they have grown weary of God. They were tired of having to live a certain way and of not being able to partake of the world's sinful pleasures.

Now this sin can easily be repeated today. We run into difficulty, we face all sorts of problems – in this economic downturn, some of us have seen our life savings vanish or have lost our jobs. Some of us have to deal with chronic and painful medical problems and these get us down. Many of us struggle in broken relationships that daily discourage us.

What is our tendency in these troubles? To question God! To quickly turn our hearts away from God, and in some way, trust ourselves or seek the comforts and pleasures of the world. We often worry or complain and grow weary of spiritual things when those comforts are denied. We all do it, don't we? So the trial is not just about ancient Israel, it's about us.

God gives two instructions: Remember the Lord's righteous acts toward them and make a proper response. They are to love Him and love other people because they remember what He has done for them.

REMEMBER THE LORD'S RIGHTEOUS ACTS

Let's pick up at verse 3: *“My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”*

What is God saying here? God's complaint is that Israel thinks God has come up short. In effect, He asks, “Do you find my redemption boring? Do you find the leadership I gave you boring? Are you tired of the protection I've given you? What have I done to you? Are you accusing me of being deficient?”

He calls His people to consider their history. They are to remember God's deliverance in the exodus from Egypt, as God recounts three ways in which He provided for them.

Through miraculous acts – ten plagues, a Passover, and crossing the Red Sea, He defeated the Egyptians and delivered them from their helpless, hopeless state under Pharaoh's whip. God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. We can see a similar redemption in the cross, can't we? We were in bondage to sin, but God had mercy and sent His Son to receive sin's punishment in our place on the cross. God rescued us. He has not let us down, but rather has lifted us up.

God did not stop with Israel's deliverance and leave them on their own. He gave Spirit-anointed leaders to guide them to the Promised Land. Moses as the law-giver who met with God, Aaron the high priest who made atonement for their sins, and Miriam, their sister, who led the people in song.

God also intervened for them along the way. We see that in the story of Balak and Balaam. As the tribes of Israel drew near to the Promised Land, the king of Moab summoned Balaam to curse Israel.

But God resisted them and blessed Israel instead. And God continues: From Shittim to Gilgal, we see the miracle crossing of the Jordan River when the waters were held back so Israel could pass into Canaan.

Now if Micah were in the courtroom today, I think he would add to his list that Christ died. Jesus carried our sins on the Cross. He rose from the dead. He abolished death. He sits on the right hand of God interceding for you.

Have you wondered why God makes us read history in order to stir our faith? In order that you may know! It's not just a set of dry, boring facts. These are the righteous acts of the Lord. Know about His deeds so that it affects you, impresses you, grips you, molds you, leaves it's mark on you. In troubling times, God says, have I not met your needs? Have I been deficient? No! Remember the righteous acts of the Lord.

You see, our motivation to worship and serve God comes from our thanksgiving for His salvation. In the gospel we see proof of His faithfulness to His promises. We see clear evidence of His redeeming love. We are to think, "The God who did all this for me will not fail to meet my present or future needs."

The apostle Paul says in Romans 8:32: *He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?*

HAVE THE PROPER RESPONSE

Let's continue. Look at verse 6. Here, Micah puts words in Israel's mouth: *With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

Micah has some interesting stuff here. Whole burnt offerings and year-old calves fattened up for a whole year end up being pretty costly sacrifices, quite an investment of time and money. Would God be satisfied with offerings like these? Or take thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of oil. King Solomon, with all of his wealth made sacrifices like these. Is that the kind of extravagance that God wants from us?

Taken to it's logical conclusion is the ultimate, agonizing sacrifice – the gift of the first-born. It's an exaggeration that captures their real attitude. What do I need to give up, what do I need to do or to give in order to compensate God for my spiritual rebellion?

Micah gives us a clear picture of the inadequacy of these human efforts to please God. We cannot buy God's favor. Sacrifice, giving, religious activity are never means to buy off God and get His blessing. Bruce Waltke has an insightful comment on this passage. He writes:

Instead of responding to such a wonderful Lord with loving and obedient hearts, Micah's generation transformed the covenant into a contract. . . Outwardly [Israel] appears spiritual as he bows before the Most High with gift in hand. But his insulting questions

betray a desperately wicked heart. Blinded to God's goodness and character, he reasons within his own depraved frame of reference. He need not change; God must change. He compounds his sin of refusing to repent by suggesting that God, like man, can be bought.

The problem with the Israelites' desire to bring sacrifices was that those sacrifices were a picture of what God had promised to give to them, the true Lamb of God, His own Son, whose death would atone for their sins. Sacrifices – any sort of religious activity – are not intended to offer a way of buying off God.

Let me ask you this: Are you under a lot of stress these days? Are you discouraged about the troubles of life? Perhaps you are struggling with financial difficulty, or problems in your marriage, or conflict at work. In your pain, have you tried to impress God with Christian service only to find Him distant and far away? Has your Christian life become more of a burden than a joy? Perhaps you misunderstand what God really requires for you to live.

As Christians, we often reconsider our commitment to Christ when we are in pain. Sometimes we think that God will like us more if we show up at more church activities, or give a little more money, or witness to our neighbors. Surely God will reward our Christian zeal and remove our problems!

We often think this way. For God to bless me, I must do more for Him. If I'm having difficulty in life, it's because I've failed to do enough. I'm tired of the Christian life because it seems that God keeps placing demands on me. I need to spend more time at church. I'm having a tough day because I missed my quiet time. God will not bless me unless I give more money or time. He won't take care of my needs until I do this or that thing for Him.

We think we must do more and more and more until we exhaust ourselves with Christian activity. Is that what God wants?

We should know that our efforts to curry God's favor always fall short. Our sacrifices of time and money are never quite enough. Our life is a never-ending story of busyness and guilt. We need to understand what God requires of us.

What then does God want from those who have received God's priceless gift of salvation? God wants a proper response to His righteous acts, a response of gratitude for what Christ has done. In verse 8, we have a familiar verse: *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Here in Micah's familiar words, we see a summary of God's law. Jesus summarized it in other ways in places like Luke 10:27: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and, "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Because God loves us and made us His people, we are to love our neighbor. Our duty to other people is to "do justice" and to "love kindness." These two ideas summarize the second great commandment.

The idea of justice is that we are to treat people fairly, offering respect and integrity. Treating people fairly, not cheating them, but giving them what they rightfully deserve. Secondly, loving our neighbor means to “love kindness.” The word for “kindness” is one of the hardest words in the Old Testament to translate. We often see it rendered as mercy, faithfulness, and loving-kindness. It is the great description of God’s kind and merciful covenant love. To “love kindness” is to look on the weak and vulnerable with the eyes of God’s love and give them not what they deserve but what they need.

These two ideas, justice and kindness, work together to show the righteous, holy, merciful, loving character of God. A God who is both just and kind – a God who must punish the wickedness of sinners and a God who is merciful and does not want to punish us. Both must go together to understand God. You cannot have one without the other. That’s why the gospel is so amazing – God piled His righteous justice on Jesus and poured His infinite mercy on us.

Micah concludes with the first great commandment, summarizing love for God: “to walk humbly with your God.” To love God is to walk with Him, to have a lifestyle wholly devoted to His glory in all things, to enjoy His justice and kindness.

To walk with God is to live humbly, circumspectly or carefully; that is, live before God with an awareness of His holiness and grace. We abandon any proud idea that God’s favor can be earned by our efforts. Walt Kaiser writes, “Pride alone insists on taking first place, but faith seeks to give God first place... Living a circumspect lifestyle will bring one’s life into conformity with God’s will.”

Only someone who is born again to a living faith in Christ can walk humbly with God. Only one who walks with God is able truly to do justice and love kindness. Put your trust in what Christ did on the Cross for you. God cannot be bought. The proper response in good times and in bad is to rely on what God has done for us and in gratitude, love Him and love other people.

Corrie ten Boom tells a story about her father, Caspar ten Boom, that exemplifies the kind of response that God wants. Her father was a watchmaker, known affectionately in Holland as “Haarlem’s Grand Old Man.” One time, when the family was experiencing financial hardship, a wealthy man came into his shop and decided to buy the most expensive timepiece available. If Mr. ten Boom sold the watch, the sale would provide for all the family’s material needs.

As her father was ringing up the sale, the man mentioned that he was buying it because a less experienced competitor had been unable to fix his previous watch. At this, Corrie’s father asked to see the broken watch. After a few minutes of tinkering, he handed it back, fixed. “There, that was a very little mistake,” he said. “It will be fine now ... Now I shall give you back your money and take back my watch.”

Corrie was amazed by her father. She complained that he had thrown away a golden opportunity for much-needed income.

But he gently chided her, “Corrie, what do you think that competitor would have said when he heard that one of his good customers had gone to Mr. ten Boom? Do you think that the name of the Lord would be honored? As for the money, trust the Lord, Corrie. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and He will take care of us.” Caspar ten Boom demonstrated justice and kindness to a competitor and

his humble walk before God demonstrated that he was redeemed and cared for by the sovereign God of grace.

God does not want us to give ourselves in costly and extravagant activity. He doesn't ask of us to busy ourselves with frantic religious stuff to earn His favor. We cannot buy His favor; our efforts are just an insult to His grace.

The Lord wants us to remember the Cross of Jesus every day and as a grateful response to His grace, walk humbly with Him and show justice and kindness to our fellow human beings.

When we are under stress, when we are discouraged by troubles of life – and when we are not! – God does not want us to abandon Him or think we must somehow buy back into His favor.

The Lord wants us to love Him and to love other people because we remember what He has done for us.